

Herman Melville
BILLY BUDD

abridged

read by
GEORGE ROSE



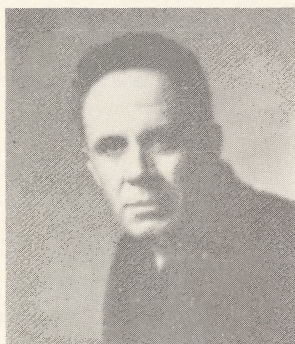
Herman Melville

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SIDE A 30:39

SIDE B 29:07



George Rose began his theatrical career as an off-stage vocalist at the Old Vic. Born in Bicester, England, Mr. Rose initially sought a career as a jazz musician in the tradition of Fats Waller. Since his debut, Mr. Rose's career has spiralled upward with stage, television and screen successes, including his hallmark performances as Dogberry in the John Gielgud production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, as the Common Man in *A Man for All Seasons*, and as Mr. Hacker in the television series *Beacon Hill*. Mr. Rose's most recent television appearance was as Mr. Lowy, the printer, in the highly acclaimed production of *Holocaust*.

Mr. Rose can also be heard on Caedmon's recordings of *MOBY DICK* (TC 2077), *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* (TC 2086) and *THE WINTER'S TALE* (SRS 214).

"**B**illy Budd," the last piece of extended fiction that Herman Melville wrote, one that was never published in his lifetime, can be reduced in its outline to the simplest of tales. In spite of tangential details and what one critic called "an excess of commentary," the story line itself stands entirely clear.

At the end of the 18th century, a young man Billy Budd is impressed into a British man of war from a merchant ship. Handsome in person, sunny in disposition, not at all resentful of his change of status from a merchant mariner to a seaman aboard a warship, Billy soon becomes the darling of the ship's company. The only blemish in this harmony is that in moments of stress Billy stutters. He is also an innocent. Free of any base motives himself, free of any evil intent toward others, he cannot quite understand even the existence of evil in others. He cannot understand that his buoyant and genial nature might be resented, even hated by those of darker spirits, men disappointed by life, who have a grudge against the universe. Billy could never have defined that Scriptural phrase "the mysteries of iniquity."

There is aboard, though, a man of such warped spirit, one John Claggart, master-at-arms. On the surface he turns a friendly countenance to the new young sailor; in secret he tries to trap him into seditious behavior. When he believes that he has accumulated enough evidence, he accuses Billy of trying to provoke a mutiny.

The Captain, Edward Fairfax Vere, a man of thought as well as a man of action, dislikes Claggart and disbelieves him. But he cannot easily dismiss such a charge. He summons Billy quietly to his cabin and lets the two men confront each other. On hearing the charge, Billy Budd is beside himself with anger; his impediment chokes him up and he cannot get his denial out. Frustrated, he strikes Claggart who falls and dies. In a moment what had been unsubstantial fancy becomes stark reality. The captain sees it immediately. An angel of vengeance has struck Claggart he exclaims, but he adds, "the angel must die."

To strike a man of higher rank was a serious offense. Claggart's death compounded the matter. The impartial onlooker in the Captain is transformed into the severe disciplinarian. With the inevitability of a machine, Billy is court-martialed—the Captain acting as witness and prosecutor—and is hanged, though the decision goes against the feelings and the inclinations of the three naval officers who sit in judgment. And so little does Billy understand, that just before his death, he cries out, "God bless Captain Vere."

It is a story full of troubled resonances. It is not one whose ending soothes the mind, nor one that induces a feeling of esthetic satisfaction. Every reader tries to reconcile what he has read with what he feels and what he feels is the profound injustice of it all. As a result there have been as many attempts to explain the story as there have been critics challenged by it.

One explanation surely is that of the Captain himself. It is necessary to remember that these happenings took place not long after the Great Mutiny in the British fleet, and there was a feeling that any faltering of official will would be a dangerous weakness. "How can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow-creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so?" Captain Vere asks the officers of the court. The question embodies their natural reaction. But he asks, "Do these buttons that we wear attest to our allegiance to Nature? No, to the King." Thus the intent of legal proceedings aboard the ship is not so much to render justice as to compel obedience.

Others see the tale differently. Edward H. Rosenberry pointed out a decade ago that "Billy Budd" has been read as a parable of God the Father sacrificing His Son for a fallen world, and finally [as] a dry mock protesting God and the whole created scheme of things." Some have seen the story as a commentary on the impersonality and brutality of the modern state, even the need at the risk of injustice, for society to protect itself.

Some have seen it as the reenactment of the Fall. "The tale of the Happy Sailor and his unhappy end," wrote Newton Arvin, "has an archetypal depth and scope that no reader can quite mistake; it is Melville's version of a primordial fable, the fable of the fall of man, the loss of paradise."

Raymond Weaver whose 1921 biography inaugurated the revival of Melville's reputation, claimed that Melville's tale only expressed the disillusion that abided with him to the end. Lewis Mumford, on the other hand, felt that the story showed that Melville was reconciled to the tragic necessity of existence. "To meet the tragedy bravely," Mr. Mumford wrote, "was to find peace, the ultimate peace of resignation even in an incongruous world." And F.O.M. Matthiesen concurred in a way with that judgment when he spoke of Billy Budd's act "as a common sailor's act of holy forgiveness." Melville, like Keats, he remarked, had learned that "the heart is the Mind's Bible" and that although tragedy is the ground base of human existence, Melville "endured to the end in the belief that though good goes down to defeat and death, its radiance can redeem life."

These varied and sometimes contradictory readings show that once read, "Billy Budd" grips the imagination, stirring something profound in our being, something we would rather let lie undisturbed. Melville lived at a time of great industrial expansion, when great fortunes were being made, when there seemed to be no limit to economic progress. But he turned his back on all this ceaseless activity, preferring like the author of the Book of Job to ask those questions that cannot be answered and that will not go away.

THOMAS LASK

Thomas Lask has been a member of the Book Review staff of *The New York Times*, edited *The New York Times Book of Verse*, and taught English for many years at the City College of New York. He is now Assistant Cultural News Editor of the *Times*.

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Herman Melville
BILLY BUDD
(abridged)
Read by George Rose

TC 1653-A

Side 1
30:39

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LONG PLAYING • 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ RPM
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MASTERS - VAN ZELDER

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Herman Melville
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TC 1653-B

Side 2
29:07

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